



## 2009 SCA Philadelphia Report

### Program Overview

During the summer of 2009, the Student Conservation Association (SCA), the Philadelphia Youth Network Workforce Ready Program and Wal-Mart joined forces to engage 47 underserved Philadelphia high school youth and 11 crew leaders in a summer employment program focused on conservation service and green jobs training. Throughout the 7-week program, crew members contributed 7,550 hours of service to the parks and green spaces of the Philadelphia area. Environmental education was emphasized throughout, with five full days dedicated to field trips to different sites in the Philadelphia area to explore careers in the conservation field, develop awareness of the local ecology and improve understanding of local environmental issues. The program concluded with a camping trip where crew members enjoyed hiking, fishing and rock climbing.



Members of SCA Philadelphia represented a broad cross-section of the city's youth, with participants drawn from 41 different high schools. The crew members were also a racially diverse group, with the following demographics: 92% African American, 4% Latino/a, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Caucasian. The group was divided nearly evenly along gender lines with 53% male and 47% female crew members.

2009 was the first year of SCA Philadelphia, which was a success by all accounts. The strongest endorsement for the program came from the students themselves who made the following remarks about their experience:

*"Who knew I would enjoy this type of work, but I really did!! I had so much fun. I went home each day with a story to tell my friends and family about my day, I can't wait until next year to come back."*

*"Even though I am not sure what I want to do when I grow I am glad I had this experience, I learned so much about myself and the environment."*

*"It was a fun summer! It felt good completing our last fence project we worked so hard on it and it looked great when it was all done!!"*

*"I loved going camping...I've never been before but I had a fun visiting a real waterfall on our hike, I want to go again with my family."*

### 2009 SCA Philadelphia Vital Statistics

- 7,550 hours of conservation service
- 1,000 hours of job training and environmental education
- 41 high schools represented
- 47 crew members
- 91% crew member retention rate
- 300 crew member applicants
- 11 crew leaders
- Program length = 7 weeks
- Project sites:
  - Valley Forge National Historical Site
  - John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge
  - Cynwyd Heritage Trail
  - Wissahickon Park

## Conservation Service Projects

Crew members were divided into teams that worked at four parks in the Philadelphia area including: Valley Forge National Historical Park, John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, Cynwyd Heritage Trail and Wissahickon Park. Together, the crews contributed more than 7,550 hours of service constructing and restoring trails, conducting wildlife surveys, restoring historical monuments and removing invasive plants. Each crew remained at one site throughout the program's duration, allowing crew members and leaders to develop a close working relationship with park staff – adding another dimension of mentorship to the experience. Staff often shared their knowledge of both the ecology and history of the various parks, further enriching the crews' understanding of Philadelphia's environment.

Most of the crews' work during the summer focused on trail restoration. Nearly six miles of trail and corridors were restored or maintained at the Friends of the Wissahickon Park, John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, Cynwyd Heritage Trail, and Valley Forge National Historical Park. By far the largest construction project completed by the crews was the removal and replacement of 30 feet of old fence along the Cynwyd trail.



Before and after- fence project at Cynwyd Heritage Trail



## Training and Education

Although experiential learning takes place throughout the summer, more deliberate training and education sessions were also built into the program. For Philadelphia crew members this included a week-long training that featured: orientation (program logistics, teambuilding, setting expectations and schedule); job-readiness (acceptable behavior and language, conflict resolution, communication, dress code and financial literacy) and conservation service (hands-on technical skills and safety and workshops led by John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge staff on invasive plant species identification and removal).

In addition, five environmental education days were built into the program to help students understand the context of their work. Special focus was placed on understanding the complexities of being a conservationist in an urban environment like Philadelphia and potential careers in the conservation field. Environmental education days included:

- ❏ Green jobs panel discussion – panelists from Delaware Valley Green Building Council, Aztec Solar Power and Mother Earth Energy lead an engaging question and answer session about their industries and career paths. Students visited their offices the following week.
- ❏ John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge – the refuge manager led a tour, highlighting how the crew members' work was contributing to the restoration of critical reptile and amphibian habitat. (photo at right)
- ❏ Elmwood Park Zoo – students were led on a behind-the-scenes tour by zoo representatives who also discussed their own career paths and various jobs at the zoo.
- ❏ Philadelphia Magic Gardens – students were led on a private “walking tour” of the gallery, which preserves the mosaics of Isaiah Zagar. The tour provided an excellent context for discussions of the urban environment, using recycled materials to produce art, and civic engagement.
- ❏ Adventure Aquarium – The students toured the aquarium, learning about local and global marine wildlife and habitat.



During the final week of the program, crew members went on a one-night camping trip, which also included hiking, fishing and rock climbing. The trip provided a much-needed chance to relax and recreate, as well as a fun introduction to outdoor recreation for many of the crew members.

## Community Outreach

SCA collaborated with the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) to recruit high school students interested in environmental studies and summer employment. 85% of the members came from the PYN recruiting, and the remaining came to the program through SCA's candidate pool.

SCA's Philadelphia Program Manager hosted two parent and student orientations during the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of June. Local newspapers covered the Wal-Mart event and some of the work was featured in the Chestnut Hill Local and Germantown Chronicle.

SCA crew members were featured in the new Ken Burns series *America's Best Idea: the National Parks: Invasion at Valley Forge* which aired nationally on PBS in September 2009. The video was also streamed on the WHYY website and excerpts were shown at an event on September 17 at the Independence Mall.

## Conclusion

SCA Philadelphia would not have been possible without a myriad of partners and friends. In addition to the primary partners – The Walmart Foundation, the Philadelphia Youth Network and SCA – dozens of high schools, park staff and community volunteer groups like Friends of the Wissahickon Park helped to support the young people involved. SCA looks forward to expanding and improving the program in future years, providing more Philadelphia youth with this unparalleled opportunity to learn about their local environment while preparing for potential careers in conservation.